Hard to stay focused? The reason might surprise you.

You are in your room studying. Your assignment is to read an article for your class. However, you are having trouble paying attention. While you are reading, you start thinking about other things, such as messages, what you will eat for dinner, or the movie you watched last night. After reading a few sentences, you realize you need to read them again to remember what you just read. One possible reason for this might surprise you.

In one study, participants looked at a face on a computer for only 75 milliseconds—less than one-tenth of a second. Sometimes, a second face appeared next to the first and distracted them. The participants pressed a computer key as quickly as possible to identify the face as male or female. They did this with 240 faces.

The first time they took the test, the participants breathed clean air. Four hours later, they took the test again. During the four-hour wait, researchers burned candles in the room, adding pollution to the air.

Two weeks later, the participants repeated the experiment. This time, they breathed polluted air before the first test and clean air before the second test.

These were the results. After breathing the polluted air, the participants took much longer to press the computer key. This suggests that polluted air can make it harder to pay attention and respond quickly.

In another study, researchers exposed 28 healthy adults to either filtered air or diesel exhaust for two hours. The participants didn't know which type of air they were breathing. They took computer tests several times before and after breathing the air. The results showed that diesel exhaust slowed their responses to certain questions.

There are also some surprising sources of air pollution in our homes that may affect our ability to focus while studying. For example, cooking can release smoke and tiny particles into the air. Cleaning products, such as sprays used to clean windows or bathrooms, can also release chemicals into the air. Car exhaust from traffic outside can also enter our homes through open windows or other openings.

Students can take steps to help them focus when studying at home. One easy step is to keep their study area free of dust. If the air outside is clean, they can open a window to let fresh air into the room. However, if the room is near a busy road or outdoor pollution is high, it may be better to keep the window closed. An air purifier can also help remove some pollutants from indoor air. Finally, students should avoid using strong cleaning sprays just before studying.

Back in your room, you open the window. You read the first sentence again—and this time, you remember it.

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Comprehension Exercise

Directions: Write T (true) or F (false) next to each sentence.

___ 1. The reason it is hard to pay attention is because of music playing.

___ 2. Participant had to decide if the picture was of a male or female.

___ 3. Researchers burned candle to make the room brighter.

___ 4. During all the tests, participants had to breath polluted air.

___ 5. When breathing polluted air, participants responded slower than when breathing clean air.

___ 6. To help focus better, it's a good idea to have clean air in our study room.

Paraphrasing Exercise

Directions: Imagine that you have this conversation with a friend.

You: I just read this interesting article.
Friend: Oh yeah. What did it say?

Write what you would tell your friend. Include as many details as you can.

After you finish writing a first draft, you can re-read the article and revise your draft. However, don't look at the article while you are writing. You can use some of these **key words** in your paraphrase.

Key Words

• in your room • trouble paying attention • after reading a few sentences • a face • 75 milliseconds • a second face • a computer key • male or female/ 240 faces • breathed clean air • burned candles • two weeks later • breathed polluted air	• longer to press computer key • 28 healthy adults • either filtered air or diesel exhaust • slowed their responses • cooking • cleaning sprays • car exhaust • dust • open / close window • busy road • air purifier

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Reflection Exercise

Directions: Write a reflection about the article. Try to write a paragraph with several sentences. In your reflection, your first sentence can be one of these:

- *I found some interesting/important information in this article.*
- *After reading this, I now would like to (learn more about /read more research about /…)*
- *There is some information in this article that I could apply to my life.*
- *I agree / disagree with the author about something.*
- *This article reminded me of (me/ my family/my friend).*
- *I was surprised by something in this article.*

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